

TITLE: Richard Helms as DCI

AUTHOR: Robert M. Hathaway

VOLUME: 37 ISSUE: Winter YEAR: 1993

STUDIES IN INTELLIGENCE

A collection of articles on the historical, operational, doctrinal, and theoretical aspects of intelligence.



All statements of fact, opinion or analysis expressed in Studies in Intelligence are those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect official positions or views of the Central Intelligence Agency or any other US Government entity, past or present. Nothing in the contents should be construed as asserting or implying US Government endorsement of an article's factual statements and interpretations.

Secret

Relations with the White House

Richard Helms as DCI

Robert M. Hathaway

Editor's Note: The following article is an excerpt from the first chapter of Richard Helms as Director of Central Intelligence, 1966-1973, which was published in 1993 by CIA's History Staff under its DCI Historical Series.

In practical terms a Director of Central Intelligence has one and only one boss: the President of the United States. Certainly a DCI has to respond to the concerns of other Washington players as well: the Secretaries of State and Defense, the President's National Security Adviser, the members of the US Intelligence Community, and strategically placed legislators in the Congress. But compared to his relations with the occupant of the Oval Office, his ties to all others pale into insignificance. A DCI in frequent contact with and fully supported by his President will have few equals in Washington in his influence on the policymaking process. Conversely, a Director lacking entry into the innermost circles of the White House quickly finds himself—no matter how well informed his sources or accurate his intelligence—isolated from the administration's central decisions. His warnings and advice will fall unnoticed into the vast wastebin of rejected and ignored memorandums Washington daily spews out.

As Director of Central Intelligence, Richard Helms served under two of the most complex and controversial Presidents in the nation's history—Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon.

In the case of Johnson, Helms was dealing with a longtime member of the Washington political establishment who was also monumentally insecure within that establishment. One of the most effective majority leaders ever to boss the United States Senate, Johnson entered the White House after John Kennedy's assassination, determined to legislate a program of reform that would rival in scope Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Yet, much against his will, he found himself swept up in a conflagration far from

American shores, a war that would eventually doom his Great Society and drive him out of the White House.

His successor was a man even more beset by inner demons. Historians will long puzzle over Richard Nixon's psychological makeup, but it is arguable that no more tortured individual had entered the White House in the 200 years of the nation's existence. Meantime and withdrawn, an unlovable man who desperately craved acceptance, Nixon—even more than Lyndon Johnson—suspected those around him of secretly laughing at him. Neither man proved an easy boss to work for. Both men came to build around themselves a protective shield of advisers to filter out unwelcome or unwanted views. And yet in many respects Richard Helms's experiences with each were stark opposites. The first of these Presidents bestowed on Helms a position of trust and influence, while the second usually regarded Helms with the distrust the besieged accords someone on the other side of the ramparts.

Richard Helms and Lyndon Johnson

According to Richard Helms, his success with President Johnson largely arose out of one dramatic coup. For the first three and a half years of his presidency Johnson had never found much use for intelligence. His relations with DCI John McCone, whom he had inherited from Kennedy, gradually soured to the point where McCone found resignation preferable to being ignored. McCone's successor, retired V. Adm. William Raborn, never came close to reestablishing a strong voice for the DCI in the White House. Within months of his appointment, the White House and others recognized that selecting Raborn as DCI had been a mistake, and in June 1966 he was replaced by Helms. In his first year, Helms

Secret*DCI*

also failed to make much of an impression on President Johnson, who was increasingly overburdened by domestic controversy and overseas crisis.

All this changed in late May and early June 1967, just as Helms was completing his first year as Director. CIA successes just before and during Israel's Six-Day War dramatically enhanced the prestige of the Agency—and of its Director—in the eyes of President Johnson. Some wonderfully accurate CIA prognostications concerning the timing, duration, and outcome of the 1967 war swept Helms into Lyndon Johnson's inner circle of advisers, where he remained for the rest of Johnson's term of office.

In Lyndon Johnson's White House, membership in the Presidential inner circle meant joining in the Tuesday luncheons, and, for the balance of the Johnson presidency, Helms attended these functions regularly. As Helms describes it, his role at these luncheons—Johnson's personal device for gathering about him the people in whom he had confidence—was to provide corrective intelligence and judgments whenever one of the other participants appeared to get off track:

He never said this to me, but I got the distinct impression that the reason he valued my presence was that I kept the game honest. When Rusk would go way out on some policy, or McNamara would advocate X, or Earle Wheeler, the Chairman of the JCS, would be too upfield, then I would come in and say, 'This is the way we understand it, and the facts are as follows. . .' And I did this constantly. So it was a useful role for him. There was no doubt about it. I went to Guam (with President Johnson); I went to God-knows-where on these various conferences on Vietnam. And when I'd get there, there wasn't a hell of a lot of work to do, but he just liked having me around, sitting there.¹

Sitting there, keeping the game honest: this was an ideal situation for an intelligence officer, to sit beside the President of the United States with an open invitation to speak up whenever facts or judgments contrary to the best available intelligence made their appearance.

Richard Helms was extremely careful not to abuse this position of trust, not to overstep his bounds as an intelligence officer. He went to considerable lengths to avoid being involved in the policy debate, and, regardless of his personal opinions, he refrained from advocating one policy over another unless directly asked by the President (as sometimes occurred). He did this not out of mere caution or self-protection, but rather out of his own deep convictions about the proper role of intelligence. "I am a believer that the Director of Central Intelligence, as the principal intelligence officer to the President, should not be involved in foreign policy recommendation," he has explained. "I don't think it's helpful to a President to have all the people surrounding him involved in policy issues."²

Helms had arrived at this conviction in part by observing the less restrained performance of John McCone. "McCone believed that he could wear two hats. One hat was as Director of the Agency and the presenter of intelligence information that the Agency produced. The other, that he could sit at meetings and help to formulate the policy that the administration ought to follow," Helms recalls. "I did not agree with that," he laconically adds. Instead, he remained silent except when one of the policy officers strayed beyond the limits of reality as indicated by Agency information and judgment. He felt that he could perform a more useful role:

by seeing to it that the Secretary of State or Defense, or whoever was advocating whatever they were advocating, stayed with the acceptable limits of the facts as we knew them, the parameters of events that had transpired. This was a useful function to perform for the President. Because every Cabinet officer, in advocating policies, whether the President's policy or not, is constantly tempted to over-drive and to oversell, to overpersuade. Often the degree to which this is being done gets lost sight of. I figure that the intelligence chief has a role to play in keeping these things in perspective, keeping the perceptions as accurate and as objective as possible.³

His membership in the White House inner coterie did not necessarily shield Richard Helms from presidential disapproval on occasion. These were

Secret

difficult, contentious times. The war in Vietnam produced sharp divisions of opinion and raised sensitivities to adverse public opinion to very high levels. For instance, Lyndon Johnson found it painful to have figures of the civilian casualties caused by US bombing publicly aired. Once, a senior Agency Officer, while briefing the Senate Armed Services Committee, was asked a question out of the blue about casualties inflicted on North Vietnam's civilian population during USAF bombing attacks. The CIA officer provided such figures as he could. Several days later Helms happened to be walking through the White House arcade between the Mansion and the President's Oval Office. Lyndon Johnson, walking alongside, took Helms by the arm and said in a fatherly tone, "Now, if you feel any urge to go up and testify in Congress on this whole question of civilian casualties in Vietnam, I just hope you'll pass by and have a drink with me the afternoon before." Helms, of course, promised he would. He later said of the incident, "This was his way of conveying a message to me that he wanted to have something to say about this. It was done pointedly but not vociferously."⁴ At his morning meeting the next day, Helms told the DDI of the President's sensitivity to North Vietnamese civilian casualty figures and instructed all elements in the Agency to avoid the subject.⁵ Although one can understand the DCI's wish to accommodate the President, in retrospect one must wonder whether the Agency could legitimately avoid or ignore evidence of civilian casualties in reporting on the war in Vietnam.

Lyndon Johnson was not always so gentle, and on two occasions in the first month that Helms was DCI the President had expressed his disapproval of certain CIA actions in loud, wrathful tones. "He was very vociferous with me and I was very vociferous right back," Helms later recalled, and continued:

After that, I never had a vociferous conversation with President Johnson again. I think he figured that taking me on that way was not very useful, and that if he wanted to talk to me he did it differently. From then on, we never had any noisy words with each other . . . no shouting back and forth.⁶

While it is easy to picture a vociferous President Johnson, it is difficult to imagine the austere and controlled Richard Helms shouting back. Nevertheless, these exchanges in the summer of 1966, combined with Helms's performance during the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war, evidently established the President's confidence and respect in him as DCI. Helms emphasizes that after the initial altercations his relationship with Johnson was excellent: "He didn't badger me; I was well treated by him."⁷

Given Johnson's penchant for informal policy discussions such as the Tuesday luncheons, and his tendency to buttonhole opponents and urge them to "sit down and reason together awhile," one might assume that he preferred to receive his intelligence information through oral briefings. Richard Helms quickly discovered, in part by observing John McCone as DCI, that this was not true. When Johnson first became President, McCone had started a program of daily briefings. As Helms remembers it, Johnson "finally got bored, closed the door, and that was the end. He just didn't want to do it any more. You couldn't make him do it any more." For Helms the implications were obvious. "This one-on-one, that people who live in academia hold to be so important, does not necessarily achieve your objective. You either adjust your production to the man you have in office or you're going to miss the train."⁸

Thus, while President Johnson found informal discussion within small groups highly useful, he shied away from formal presentations and prolonged briefings. It was clear to Helms that "Johnson was much better at reading documents. The way to get his attention was to present a well-reasoned, well-written piece of paper."⁹ Helms enjoyed his first real success with Johnson largely through the Board of National Estimates' short analysis controverting an alarmist Israeli intelligence estimate in May 1967. This success encouraged Helms to send—as often as several times a week—brief memorandums containing information pertinent to the President's current concerns. Lyndon Johnson was a voracious reader who kept several news tickers operating just outside

Secret**DCI**

his office door, regularly tearing off long swatches to scan, and he found himself well served by the DCI's steady flow of brief, sharply pointed pieces. They provided a backdrop and written basis for the comments Helms made "to keep the game honest" during informal policy meetings.

These same presidential preferences dictated Helm's modus operandi at National Security Council meetings. During the Eisenhower administration, when many NSC customs and practices were institutionalized, the Director of Central intelligence, though not a statutory member of the body, became a regular participant in its deliberations. Allen Dulles would always present an intelligence briefing and relished these opportunities to intermingle juicy tidbits of intelligence with more solid substantive material. Under John F. Kennedy, National Security Council meetings were mostly formal events, held only sporadically. When they were held, John McCone usually gave a sober account of the world's problems as seen through the eyes of CIA and its Director.

Richard Helms attempted to carry on this tradition once he became DCI by presenting a survey of the world in a 10- to 15-minute briefing. He found that with Lyndon Johnson this was a mistake:

With President Johnson . . . I finally came to the conclusion that what I had to say I should get into the first 60, or at least 120 seconds, that I had on my feet. Because after that he was pushing buttons for coffee or Fresca, or talking to Rusk, or talking to McNamara, or whispering here or whispering there. I had lost my principal audience.¹⁰

The adjustment made for Johnson consisted of a steady stream of short, crisp papers combined with attendance at the Tuesday luncheons.

One must be careful not to place too rosy a glow on the relationship between Helms and Johnson. Many commentators have noted the inherent conflict between sophisticated intelligence, which is apt to see many sides of a question, and the needs of decisionmakers, who must often ignore shadings and ambiguities in deciding upon a single course of action. The last thing a policymaker wishes to hear

is why his preferred course of action may not work, but that is precisely the service timely intelligence often provides. Lyndon Johnson has left us with a memorable quotation with respect to this spoiling role intelligence often plays. "Policymaking is like milking a fat cow," the President remarked on one occasion. "You see the milk coming out, you press more and the milk bubbles and flows, and just as the bucket is full, the cow with its tail whips the bucket and all is spilled. That's what CIA does to policymaking."¹¹

During the Johnson years, CIA played the cow's tail repeatedly on matters pertaining to the war in Southeast Asia. Helms's Agency again and again produced intelligence analyses that conflicted with the optimistic line the White House took on the progress of the war. Johnson's response was not to change course, but to ignore what his intelligence experts were telling him. As administration policy became more and more beleaguered, the White House decisionmaking process became an exceptionally closed one—with discouraging intelligence reports and analyses excluded from any role in policymaking. So while it is undoubtedly true that Johnson found it useful to have Helms close at hand, this does not mean that the White House always accorded the products of Helms's Agency the respect or voice this might imply. In certain important respects, most notably on matters pertaining to the war in Indochina, Johnson seems to have divorced Helms from the CIA, valuing the former even as he chose to ignore the latter.

Richard Helms and Richard Nixon

Compared to what followed, however, the Johnson years seem almost a golden era of President-DCI, White House-CIA relations. A warning that this favorable situation would soon end was sounded on 31 March 1968, when President Johnson announced that he would not seek reelection. Helms sent a personal note to LBJ expressing his keen regret over this decision.

Immediately after Richard Nixon's electoral triumph in November 1968, Johnson called Helms to the White House to meet the President-elect. At this

Secret

meeting LBJ informed his DCI that starting immediately Helms was to make CIA's entire output of reporting and analysis—"everything that I get"—available to Nixon. Since the Nixon staff had decided to remain at its campaign headquarters at the Pierre Hotel in New York until Inauguration Day, CIA had to set up a secure Agency outpost where the ultrasensitive daily and weekly periodicals as well as numerous codeword studies could be transmitted electronically. Helms dispatched a team to New York, and over the weekend these officers established a vaulted, secure area in the basement of the American Bible Society Building a short distance from the Pierre Hotel. On the following Monday CIA materials began to flow to New York for the use of President-elect Nixon and National Security Assistant-designate Henry Kissinger.¹²

Even before Nixon's inauguration, Helms received disturbing indications that his would be a far less favored position under the new President than it had been under Johnson. Early presidential ideas on organizing the national security function envisioned excluding the DCI from National Security Council meetings. Nixon backed away from this extreme position before it was implemented, when the new Secretary of Defense, Mel Laird, interceded on Helms's behalf. Nevertheless, in the early days of his administration Nixon allowed Helms to attend NSC meetings only to offer factual briefings, after which he excused the DCI from the room. The awkwardness of this situation was immediately obvious in the NSC, and after six weeks or so the DCI was permitted to remain throughout the meeting.

Henry Kissinger's memoirs suggest one reason behind the President's frontal assault upon Helms's position within the decisionmaking apparatus. Nixon brought to the presidency, Kissinger has written, a belief that the CIA was "a refuge of Ivy League intellectuals opposed to him." A man prone to see enemies everywhere, Nixon blamed his 1960 defeat for the presidency on allegedly inaccurate and politically motivated CIA estimates that the Soviets had achieved strategic superiority over the United States during the Eisenhower years when Nixon served as Vice President; this was, of course, the so-called missile gap. Nixon was convinced that Agency liberals, behind a facade of analytical objectivity, were

usually pushing their own agenda—a far Left, essentially defeatist set of views incompatible with those held by the silent majority of Middle America, which he had adopted (or created) as his constituency. As for Helms, Kissinger reports, the new President felt ill at ease with the DCI, "since he suspected that Helms was well liked by the liberal Georgetown social set," the very "establishment" Nixon professed to scorn.¹³

Why did Nixon, given these prejudices, decide to keep Helms as DCI? The former President has never explained his reasoning, but the answer may partly lie with the extremely narrow margin of his 1968 presidential victory. Given the absence of any real mandate, he almost certainly felt a need to move cautiously. With Helms commanding widespread and bipartisan respect in Washington, there were no compelling reasons, nor any importunate alternative candidates, to justify or require a change. In addition, the practice of each new President appointing his own Director of Central Intelligence had not yet been established in 1969; both Kennedy and Johnson had retained DCIs selected by their predecessors. Finally, Nixon's bias was not so much against Helms as against the Agency he ran.

Although he kept his job, Helms realized immediately that his Agency was in for some rough sledding. "It was bound to be a rocky period with Richard Nixon as President, given the fact that he held the Agency responsible for his defeat in 1960," the former DCI would later say. "And he never forgot that. He had a barb out for the Agency all the time." Nixon initially concentrated his fire on the National Intelligence Estimates, evidently regarding them as the chief vehicle for CIA animosity. And his memory was long. From the early days of his administration, Helms recalls, the President singled out for criticism Estimates from the 1950s, when he was Eisenhower's Vice President. "He would constantly, in National Security Council meetings, pick on the Agency for not having properly judged what the Soviets were going to do with various kinds of weaponry . . . he would make nasty remarks about this and say this had to be sharpened up. The Agency had to understand it had to do a better job and so on." Helms's concluding remarks are arresting: "Dealing with him was tough, and it seems to

Secret**DCI**

me that the fact I ended up with my head on my shoulders after four years of working with him is not the least achievement of my life."¹⁴

Nor were the temperament and personal style of Richard Nixon the only obstacles Helms faced under the new regime. The new President surrounded himself with a staff that combined an intensely personal loyalty to its boss with a vindictive capacity for seeing presidential adversaries in every quarter. Helms thinks it likely that personalities played a role in the uncomfortable situation in which he found himself:

To this day, I obviously don't have any way of judging what my being Director had to do with this one way or the other. Because, after all, Nixon reappointed me. But I was no man for (presidential assistants) Ehrlichman or Haldeman. I mean, they didn't like the appointment in the first place. So there was an element that was anti-Helms. I mean, it didn't manifest itself with knives in my back, particularly, but, you know, "this guy's not for it."¹⁵

CIA was not the only agency to notice a marked change once the Nixon team replaced Johnson's. The revelations in the Watergate hearings have made it abundantly clear that President Nixon viewed most of the governmental institutions he inherited from his predecessor with keen distrust. The new administration brought to the daily operation of the government an us-against-them approach. The White House seemed to regard the entire governmental bureaucracy as just another locus of political partisanship, necessitating tighter control and greater centralization within the small group of officials close to the President.

This was particularly true in the realm of national security policy, where Kissinger moved quickly to establish a strong National Security Council staff under his leadership. Moreover, he brought a new dimension to the job of Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. Both his immediate predecessors, McGeorge Bundy and Walt Rostow—presidential assistants to Kennedy and Johnson—were men of broad understanding and high intelligence. Bundy and Rostow, however, had confined themselves to subordinate roles in national

security affairs, primarily making certain that the President was kept thoroughly informed on key issues by channeling the requisite information to him. Kissinger, a man of powerful intellect with an ego to match, injected himself far more directly into the actual policymaking process. The former professor turned National Security Assistant imposed a strict methodology upon the formulation of policy and the intelligence to support it. For the Intelligence Community this entailed a rigidly formalistic system designed to generate multiple policy options for White House use. In Kissinger's scheme of things, CIA was demoted from its traditional position as the primary governmental source for objective reporting and analysis on international affairs and relegated to being merely another contender for White House attention.

Even though Kissinger himself was very critical of national estimates, in Helms's view Nixon's "carping" heightened this disdain. "So estimating was hardly something that he wanted to be a champion for," Helms later observed of Kissinger. "These two men tended to work on each other with respect to the estimating process of the Agency. And Kissinger, feeling that Nixon didn't regard the estimates as being very good, didn't pay very much attention to them himself." Moreover, he had a tendency to be selective in the way he read intelligence. All this, Helms came to feel, was:

part of Kissinger's tactics. The more you keep people off balance, the more you keep the pressure on, the more he felt they'd work harder or be more careful or do a better job or something. So that getting any praise out of Kissinger for any particular thing was—well, it virtually never happened. He didn't have any commendations to hand around to anybody.¹⁶

The result, Helms has noted, was a period when Agency analysis and estimating rather consistently encountered heavy weather in the White House.

In other respects as well, Nixon was quite unlike the gregarious Johnson. Opportunities for informal meetings with the President were few, and direct substantive exchange between Nixon and Helms quite

Secret

meager. Most presidential foreign policy discussions took place in closed Oval Office sessions with Henry Kissinger and Nixon the only participants. In contrast to LBJ, Nixon chose not to rely on his Director of Central Intelligence to keep the facts straight and the judgments sound. Except for Kissinger, who quickly established a secure relationship with the President in the realm of national security affairs, the Nixon White House inner circle consisted exclusively of presidential campaign lieutenants and political partisans.

Like LBJ, however, Nixon preferred to receive his intelligence information through the printed word. Nixon "took it in better through the eye," Helms recalls. In NSC meetings, he "would sit there for longer briefings—but after the first five minutes his mind would start to wander, too, unless something came up that he was particularly interested in. So one has to adjust to these things."¹⁷ Thus the question became how to get the important documents to Nixon's desk. The problem was made considerably more difficult by the system Kissinger established with his NSC staff—with President Nixon's approval—for filtering the flow of information to the Oval Office. At the outset of the Nixon administration, Helms attempted to send to Nixon, as he had to Johnson, a steady flow of short pieces containing intelligence pertinent to ongoing events. But since Nixon felt no particular need for the type of in-depth CIA reports and studies the Agency had provided for Johnson, Helms was soon reduced to sending Kissinger those items he felt contained especially pertinent information, with a note politely suggesting that the information be passed to the President. In short, direct access to the President for timely and sensitive information from his principal intelligence officer was closed off during the Nixon administration.

The record of CIA intelligence support during the Johnson and Nixon administrations amply illustrates that it is the President himself who determines how effective that support can be. His attitudes, his work habits, his receptivity to objective judgment whether favorable or unfavorable to his hopes and plans—these are the essential elements in determining how much

and how well his intelligence organizations can help him. Richard Helms well understood this point:

Each President has to be dealt with by a Director according to his personality and according to his way of doing business. To have (someone) say that the Director's relationship with the President should be X, Y, or Z is absolutely worthless. . . . There is no way that these things can be legislated or controlled. Every President is going to do his business the way he wants to do it. You say, "Well, he should discipline himself," but they never do. They do it exactly the way they want to do it.¹⁸

The single most important thing a DCI must have to ensure maximum impact and effectiveness is access to the President. But here again, such access depends entirely on the principal occupant of the White House. "Most people miss the point about the United States Government," Helms has remarked:

The Cabinet and all the principal (posts) are appointive jobs; they are all appointive. . . . (And) every single one of those fellows has got to be someone the President can get along with. If the President doesn't get along with him, then he'll fade away.¹⁹

Richard Helms did not fade away, but neither was he able to use CIA intelligence to serve President Nixon as well as he might have.

The contrast between the relationship Helms and CIA enjoyed with Lyndon Johnson and their relationship with Richard Nixon underscores this point. The policy problems the two Presidents faced, and the intelligence CIA could provide to help them deal with those problems, were not significantly different in kind or quality. Yet, measured by the effective assistance CIA was permitted to offer, the contrast is stark. In the atmosphere of the Johnson administration, CIA under Richard Helms was a trusted, competent ally that was accorded the large scope to do

Secret**DCI**

its job. The Nixon administration, on the other hand, tended to see the Helms CIA as a suspect, erratic entity that required constant scrutiny to ensure that it acted in the interests of the White House rather than its own. The record makes it clear: CIA intelligence was only as useful as the President permitted it to be.

NOTES

1. Richard M. Helms, interview by R. J. Smith, tape recording, Washington, DC, 21 April 1982 (hereafter cited as Helms interview, 21 April 1982) (SECRET). Recordings, transcripts, and notes for the interviews conducted for this study are on file in the CIA History Staff office.
2. Richard M. Helms, interview by R. J. Smith, tape recording, Washington, DC, 3 June 1982 (hereafter cited as Helms interview, 3 June 1982) (SECRET).
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. Morning Meeting Minutes, 31 January 1967.
6. Helms interview, 3 June 1982.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. Henry Brandon, *The Retreat of American Power* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), p. 103.
12. Kissinger's full title was Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs.
13. Henry A. Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), pp. 11, 36.
14. Helms interview, 21 April 1982.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. Helms interview, 3 June 1982.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*

This article is SECRET.

Secret

40